

They ate *what*?

James Roy

Would a good Greek father have bought his hungry child some dog to eat? He might well have done, for it is clear that classical Greeks ate dog, even though some modern works still deny this. Some Greek writers of the Roman imperial period also claimed that in their day Greeks did not eat dog: but Aelian (second or third century A.D.) wrote that the dog's sense of smell is so acute that he never eats roast dog-meat, no matter how it is disguised by sauce. Even later writers who denied that Greeks ate dog did not speak for all Greeks. Nor is eating dog so very strange: dog-meat is eaten today not only in the Far East but also, for instance, in Nigeria and eastern Switzerland. But questions remain. How often did Greeks eat dog? And how did eating dog relate to Greeks' other attitudes to dogs?

Hedgehog for dinner?

One well-known text disparages dog-meat: in Aristophanes' *Knights* 1397–401 the vulgar main character Sausage-seller says that his rival 'Paphlagon' (a rude name for the politician Cleon) will sell at the city gates sausages made of dog- and donkey-meat, exchange foul language with prostitutes, and drink used bath-water. Certainly Greeks did not see dog-meat as a luxury: it does not figure in the menus of feasts in comedy. Yet dog appears frequently in the early medical texts known as the Hippocratic corpus. The Hippocratic treatise *On Diet* reviews the various qualities of meat from 'the animals that are eaten': cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, donkeys, dogs, deer, hare, and hedgehog, with, in most cases including dog, a comparison of meat from the adult animal with that from the young (calf, lamb, kid, etc.). Later writers give much more colourful lists: another medical writer, Galen, for instance, mentions as forms of meat pork, beef, goat, lamb, hare, venison, wild ass, domestic donkey, horse, camel, bear, lion, leopard, panther, fox, as well as dog (in some countries) and human flesh (served by some unscrupulous restaurateurs). Even if there was in Galen's day a fashion for eating animals from the arena, this is an exotic catalogue and by comparison the Hippocratic list is very sober, and credible.

The other animals recommended by the Hippocratic writers as food were eaten, and so dog too was evidently part of the normal Greek diet. It is particularly striking that elsewhere in *On Diet* it is recommended that in certain circumstances the patient should not eat either dog or kid, which suggests that, unless warned, the patient might well have consumed these meats. It can probably therefore be assumed that many Greeks, and not only the poorest, would at least occasionally eat dog-meat. The Hippocratics did not recommend dog-meat for religious reasons: dogs did play a part in some Greek cults, including notably the healing cult of Asklepios, but when the Hippocratics recommend dog-meat they never refer to religious practice. Hippocratic diets were based on medical theory, and on availability. Presumably only a fairly wealthy household could slaughter an animal to feed an invalid, but the case of donkey-meat (recommended, though only rarely) is revealing since it could be bought. From an encyclopaedia of the second century A.D. we learn that at Athens the place where donkey-meat was sold was called *memnoneia*. Fish too is often recommended and would have to be bought. It was probably possible to buy dog-meat, not only in sausages.

Evidence of bones

There is also archaeological evidence that Greeks ate dog. Analysis of animal bones bearing cut-marks or other signs of butchery or cooking is well established, but most classical Greek bone-assemblages come from religious sanctuaries, where the bones were discarded as refuse from animals sacrificed and eaten. But how can we distinguish the bones of dogs that were actually eaten from those of dogs that lived in the sanctuary, scavenging on the left-overs from sacrifices, and died there? Only dog-bones with marks of butchery can be taken as evidence of the eating of dog. A few Greek sanctuaries have produced bones showing that dogs were sacrificed and eaten, but it was rare in the Greek world to sacrifice dogs and, when it was done, the animals were normally destroyed, not eaten.

Reports of animal bones, including dog-bones, from non-religious sites in classical Greece are still rare. One notable case is a well in the Hellenistic Agora in Pella in Macedonia which produced, besides other butchered bone, dog skeletons with cut-marks on the long-bones. The fact that the bones were found in the Agora suggests that, whether sacrificed or not, the meat from these dogs was sold. It is likely that most of the dogs eaten by Greeks were butchered in non-religious contexts, but the present limited evidence from excavation does not tell us much.

Dog lovers

Whether Greeks were prepared to eat dog-meat might have been affected by their attitudes to dogs generally, but their relations with dogs were varied and complex. Dogs served men in several ways, in hunting, as sheepdogs and watchdogs, and even sometimes in war. Affection often developed between man and dog, and there is clear evidence of it, for instance in the burials of favourite pets: a good example is the fourth-century B.C. burial east of the Agora in Athens of a dog with a large beef bone near its head. From the Hellenistic period onwards verse epitaphs appear for favourite animals, including dogs: some of these poems were probably only literary exercises, but examples are found on actual tombstones. At Termessos in Pisidia a tombstone from the Roman period was found with seven hexameter lines: they include 'this is the tomb of the dog Stephanos who perished, whom Rhodope wept for and buried like a man: I am the dog Stephanos, and Rhodope built a tomb for me.' Nearby was found the sarcophagus of the dog's owner Aurelia Rhodope.

Dog haters

But, while affection for dogs was common and real, ancient attitudes to dogs were much more complex. Hostility to dogs, and even contempt, were equally common. Dogs could be treacherous, thieving, violent, and shameless in their behaviour. The myth of the hunter Aktaion, torn apart by his own hounds, expresses vividly dogs' ferocity. The word 'dog' (*kuôn*) itself, and compounds formed with it, were often used as an expression of derision for humans. Already in Homer there was the comparative form *kunteros* meaning 'more like a dog, more shameless': in the *Iliad* Zeus rudely says to his wife Hera 'there is nothing else more shameless (*kunteron*) than you.' Greek belief in the shamelessness of dogs is reflected in the name of the Cynics (*Kunikoi* in Greek), who defied normal standards of morality and did in public things for which Greek convention

demanding privacy. Conceivably Greeks who felt strong affection for a favourite dog might have been reluctant to eat dog-meat, but it would be extremely difficult to deduce from the Greeks' very varied views on dogs how Greeks in general may have felt about eating dog. Rather, it seems simpler to accept that Greeks looked on dogs in various different ways, some favourable and some very critical, and one way was to see them as food.

To return to why dog was a regular but apparently minor part of the Greek diet. There is no reason to think that there was any scarcity of dogs. It is however of great importance that dog was rarely killed for human consumption by sacrificial ritual. This not only limits the number of butchered dog bones found archaeologically, but would also have made the meat less desirable to ancient Greeks. The Greeks believed that it was permissible to eat the meat of an animal not killed by ritual sacrifice, and such meat was sometimes sold in the market, like the donkey-meat sold in Athens. However, it was regarded as inferior to meat which had been ritually slaughtered. Greek sacrificial practice and Greek culinary preferences had clearly developed together: the animals that were normally sacrificed were the animals most often eaten. These were in turn animals that the Greek rural economy could conveniently rear to provide not only meat but also other food (milk and milk products) and wool and hides, and to serve as work animals. Yet no bar was placed on eating the meat of animals, such as horses, donkeys, and dogs, that were generally reduced to a secondary rank outside the normal range of sacrifice for human consumption. Greek religious custom was evidently too prudent to waste any useful source of nourishment. And so Greeks loved dogs, and feared them, and ate them too.

James Roy recently retired from the Department of Classics at Nottingham University. One of his special interests is Arcadia, the one area of Greece where, it was rumoured, human flesh was eaten in certain secret rites.